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Hair

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Jasmine Wise is a Psychology major with a minor in Sociology from Monroe, LA. Upon graduating from Xavier in 2012, she plans to pursue a graduate degree in Community or Social Psychology. Wise's research interests include rites of passages, life experiences, personality, and attitudes. She has also conducted research at Dr. Lisa Molix's Social Psychology Lab at Tulane University, as well as in Xavier's Department of Communications under the guidance of Dr. Lisa Flanagan. Wise's initial involvement with this project began as a Performance of Culture/Identity assignment.

Hair

Jasmine Wise, Psychology

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Lisa Flanagan, Communications

Abstract

This original performance piece was used to fulfill a "Performance of Culture/Identity" assignment in Communication Studies 2400: The Theatre. The goal of the assignment was to "demonstrate an understanding of culture and/or identity as performed constructions and to use performance to show the values attached to culture and/or identity." "Hair" used the notion of doing one's hair as a performance of culture in the African American community. Using personal narrative and performance theory, the performer tells her rite of passage journey into doing her own hair. The piece has been performed at the Petit Jean Performance Festival in Arkansas and the "Performing Identity & Ritual" showcase at Xavier University.

Key Terms:

- Social Construction of Identity
- Performance of Culture
- Rite of Passage

Context Statement

According to Arnold van Gennep, all rites of passage fit into one of the six categories: “strangers, pregnancy and childbirth, birth and childhood, initiation rites, betrothal and marriage, and funeral” (Bell 122-123). The rite of doing your own hair as a young girl is included in the initiation rite category. In a sense, this rite initiates one from childhood into adolescence. During adolescence, everything about a person changes: the way she looks, sounds, and even thinks. Doing your own hair is a part of changing the way you look.

Performance theorists agree that all rituals share certain qualities. Elizabeth Bell explains five characteristics of ritual like activities that demonstrate that “ritualization is a process, flexible and strategic” (128). This is also true of doing your own hair for the first time. As a flexible process, one day you might be doing your own hair, but the next day your mother can be taking over the hair styling. It can also be strategic. A mother knows when a child has the mental, physical, and styling capacity to do her own hair independently, despite the child’s expressed interest in doing so.

For these reasons, I start my performance saying, “Ritualization is a process, flexible and strategic.” My goal is to show the ritual of learning to do your own hair as a female in the African American culture. The flexibility and strategy comes from the mother figure mentioned throughout the piece. When I am stubborn in wanting to do my own hair at an early age, the mother is strategic. She allows me to do my own hair before I am actually ready, knowing that it will prove to me that I am not yet ready.

Van Gennep believes that all rites of passages have the same amount of significance, explaining that they are “ordered in a typical recurring pattern:” separation, transition, and

incorporation (Bell 121). Doing hair is no different. You become separated from the past tradition of your mother styling your hair for you. You are accustomed to waking up every morning, sitting in the chair, and waiting for your mother to style your hair. That is no longer the custom, and you must adjust.

The transition can either be smooth or rocky. This is the “in between” part of the process. For some girls, doing their own hair could work on the first try. For others, the first attempt could be a disaster that needs to be worked on over and over again. This is the part of the rite that can be confusing. You do not know if you are styling your hair correctly or if other people like it. The transitional stage is also where you experiment with your hair. You are out of your mother’s hands so you can try new styles. Van Gennep believes that the transition stage is significant on its own, but is also included within the separation phase.

During the performance, the table is not placed within reach of the chair. The chair belongs to my mother, and the table is mine. When the table is pulled back, I become owner of both the chair and the table. These symbolize both the separation and transition stages of the rite. When I realize that I cannot drive, the chair belongs to my mother once again so that I can be taught another lesson and start another rite of passage. Between getting my hair done and doing my morning tasks, I stand and sit to show ownership of my body in that area. While in the seat, I am essentially “my mother’s little girl,” which is yet another way to show that this transition stage takes time.

The incorporation stage of the rite is when the little girl becomes an adolescent. The new way of her doing her own hair is included in her everyday life. Life returns to normal and any differences become unnoticeable. This stage takes the parent and child’s time and effort to adjust to the new actions. Here the child is embraced by others who are also beginning to do their own hair.

She can now relate to more females not only children.

As van Gennep describes them, rites are “territorial passages” (Bell 122). In some societies, rites of passage allow freedom. If not total freedom, you may be granted more reign over your own life and decision making. For example, you are able to be free with your hair. You are no longer a child whose hair looks the same as every other eight year old. You are an adolescent with her own style. Along with this freedom come other freedoms such as picking out your own clothes.

Throughout this piece, I mention and use a flat iron and a *Seventeen* magazine. The flat iron’s uses grow and change as I grow and change. First, it is used only as a toothbrush because brushing one’s teeth is done at every stage of life. Then, the flat iron becomes a lint brush to show that I am more cognizant of what I look like. Next, it is used as deodorant to show growth from childhood to adolescence. And finally, the flat iron becomes lip gloss, which seems to be every teenage girl’s best friend. This signifies how much I want to do things on my own even though I may not be ready. The *Seventeen* magazine is a representation of the many magazines that encouraged me to be older than I really am. It also affected the way that I did my hair and dressed from time to time. The *Sister*, *Sister* reference to Tia and Tamara serves the same purpose. As a child, I thought that they were the prettiest girls that I had ever seen.

In order to show an age progression, I changed my vocal tone. In addition, the terms that I use to call my mother’s name changes. She is first “mommy” to show my youth and innocence. She becomes “mom” to identify my normal name for her. The times that she is “mother” depict my aggravation because she is not letting me grow at the rate I want. She turns back to “mom” when I am no longer frustrated and can style my hair on my own. All is back to normal; there is no longer a

transition stage, and I am now back to my normal state just as when she would do my hair.

Works Cited

Bell, Elizabeth. *Theories of Performance*. Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2008.

Hair

A chair is placed stage center. Downstage of the chair, a flat iron and Seventeen magazine are placed on a table.

NARRATOR: *(Stands in front of chair, stretches arms out to side, and bends forward)* Ritualization is a process, flexible and strategic. *(Sits in chair)* I began asking my mother could I do my own hair at a very young age, around five actually. Of course the answer was, “no.”

JASMINE: Mommy! Hurry up! I’m gonna be late for school. *(Folds arms and pouts)* Are you done yet?! *(Stands up and uses flat iron as toothbrush; freezes the image)*

NARRATOR: *(Sits down in chair)* I asked all of the time, and of course the answer was still, “no,” because I was still too young.

JASMINE: Why not? Tia and Tamara on T.V. get to do their own hair. *(Points downstage left)* Okay then. Mom, hurry up! I’m gonna be late for school. *(Folds arms and pouts)* Are you done yet?! *(Stands up and uses flat iron as toothbrush, then lint roller; freezes the image)*

NARRATOR: *(Sits back down with Seventeen magazine in hand)* I kept on asking, and I could tell that she was going to break soon.

JASMINE: Can you do my hair like this? Please?! *(Points to page in magazine)* Okay then. Well, when I do my own hair it’s gonna look just like this! *(Pauses and continues to*

flip pages) Mom, hurry up! I’m gonna be late for school. *(Folds arms and pouts)* Are you done yet?! *(Gets up and use flat iron as toothbrush, then lint roller, and then deodorant; freezes the image)*

NARRATOR: *(Stands to the right of the chair)* One Sunday morning when I went to sit down my mother told me I could style my hair myself.

JASMINE: *(Looks towards the back of the chair)* For real?!? Okay then. *(Stands up and quickly uses flat iron as toothbrush, then lint roller, then deodorant, then slowly as an actual flat iron; freezes the image)*

NARRATOR: *(Walks in front of the chair from stage left to stage right)* I knew my hair looked good! Just like in the *Seventeen* I had read. When I got to church everyone looked at me and said “You did your hair yourself today, huh?” That’s when I knew it was a part of her diabolical plan to have me looking crazy at church so she could continue to do my hair, but one day! *(Stands in front of chair, stretches arms out to side, and bends forward)* Ritualization is a process, flexible and strategic.

JASMINE: *(Sits down in chair)* Mother hurry up. I’m gonna be late for school. *(Folds arms and pouts)* Are you done yet?! *(Gets up and uses flat iron as toothbrush, then lint roller, then deodorant, and then lip gloss; freezes the image)*

NARRATOR: *(Sits down in chair)* Of course I continued to get older and play with my hair on my own. My

mother would sometimes let me try, but somehow I always ended up in this chair every morning.

JASMINE: Mom hurry up. I'm gonna be late for school. *(Folds arms and pouts)* Are you done yet?!

NARRATOR: *(Stands up and moves towards table. Pull table closer and sits in the chair)* Finally, the day came. I was allowed to style my own hair, and not just for one day, but every day!

JASMINE: *(Stands and uses flat iron as toothbrush, then lint roller, then deodorant, then lip gloss, and then flat iron)* I'm almost done! Yes mom, I am. I promise! No, we're not gonna be late!

NARRATOR: This is where I just knew that I was "the stuff." I had the freedom to be whoever I wanted to be, whenever I wanted to be. Well, at least when it comes to my hair.

JASMINE: My hair looks wonderful today! I'm ready, mom!

NARRATOR: Finally, I became an adolescent. In my eyes I could do anything that I wanted to, but drive. *(Pushes the table forward and stands up)*

JASMINE: Mom, hurry up I'm gonna be late for school!

NARRATOR: *(Stands in front of chair, stretches arms out to side, and bends forward)* Ritualization is a process, flexible and strategic.

Acknowledgments

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